

## **VIVA LA CAUSA: Continuing Cesar's Struggle for Workers' Rights**

By Hilda L. Solis and David Bonior

Nearly forty years ago, Cesar Chavez led a 340-mile march from the grape fields of Delano to the California State House in Sacramento. Under a banner declaring, "Viva La Causa," thousands of farm workers, religious leaders, students and civil rights activists marched to appeal on the state government to pass laws that would permit farm workers to organize into a union and allow collective bargaining agreements.

Cesar's call for justice for agricultural workers was inextricably bound to the cause of preserving American democracy. By demanding respect for the rights of all workers to negotiate the terms and conditions of their employment with their employers, he reminded us that the freedom of association is often the key to self determination. Said Cesar, "From the depth of need and despair, the people can work together, can organize themselves to solve their own problems and fill their own needs with dignity and respect."

If Cesar Chavez were still alive, he would say that immigrants and all workers need unions today more than ever. In the fields, migrant farm workers still suffer life and death health consequences due to their exposure to toxic pesticides. In meat and poultry plants, immigrant workers lose their limbs and lives needlessly because their cries for safer working conditions go unheard and unheeded. A recent *Boston Globe* article found that immigrants are more likely to die on the job than any other group of workers.

In a variety of industries, immigrants are particularly at risk from unscrupulous employers who use the threat of deportation, language barriers, and lack of knowledge of legal protections to violate their rights with little to no impunity. Their vulnerability often forces immigrant workers to accept poor and unsafe working conditions, low wages and few benefits.

Chavez, a native son of Arizona and an adopted son of California, would remind us today that how we treat our most vulnerable workers reflects who we are as a nation. In America, we believe that hard work is rewarded fairly, and if you get sick, you deserve good health care. Chavez understood what many today fail to comprehend: when immigrant workers are allowed to work for pennies on the dollar or are enlisted to work under dangerous conditions, these ideals are undermined for all workers. Only by organizing immigrants and allying with their cause can we ensure that all worker receive fair and equal compensation.

When Latino workers organize themselves into unions, great things can happen for all of us, and the dreams of Cesar Chavez can be realized. Today, a Latino union worker makes 51 percent more than a non-union Latino worker. The Center of Urban Economic Development found that joining a union was one of the most potent anti-poverty measures available to Latino immigrant workers. And the benefits of union membership

extend beyond improved wages. Unions are bargaining for ESL courses and citizenship classes for their members. Involvement in school governance and other community issues are also important for unions. Members have worked to enact safety measures that take into account language barriers and also celebrate important holidays with a well deserved day off. In other words, unions are providing fair compensation and paving the way for immigrants to contribute to our communities and our nation.

Unfortunately, employees who attempt to exercise their right to form or join a union are often under attack. Each year, 23,000 workers in America experience severe discrimination or termination for union activity. An employer can use its power to bribe, threaten, and intimidate workers into voting against a union. And immigrant workers are particularly at risk to having their rights to organize violated.

Here in the Southland, employers engage in illegal tactics, including using workers' immigration status as a threat. One worker, Lucrecia Barrantes was pressured to sign a petition against her union by a supervisor who "reminded" her that she didn't have immigration papers. Her co-worker was effectively held hostage in an elevator by her supervisor who wanted her to sign the petition. This type of behavior is both illegal and immoral. Faced with this form of intense intimidation, workers like Lucrecia are faced with the impossible choice of standing up for themselves or accepting dangerous, exploitative working conditions in order to remain employed.

America can do better. As lawmakers, we recognize that only the power of the government—which Cesar Chavez saw as the embodiment of our collective consciousness—can establish rules for health, safety, and the respect of workers' rights. We accept his challenge and work together to support legislation such as the Employee Free Choice Act, at the national level, that ensures that all workers have a free choice and a fair chance to exercise their freedom of association.

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